

# THE FIRST CENTURY OF OREGON STATE PARKS



SO THE FUTURE  
WILL HAVE A PLACE



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ISBN: 978-0-578-39104-5 (Paperback)

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Copyediting and photo captions by Jean Thompson, OPRD.  
Additional review by Christy Sweet, OPRD Historian.

*“So the Future Will Have a Place”:*  
**The First Century of Oregon State Parks**

MARIN AURAND AND MARC CARPENTER

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In 2022, the Oregon Parks and Recreation Commission consisted of seven members, appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Senate, to set policy and adopt rules for the agency. The Commission also promotes Oregon's outdoor recreation policy and has specific authority to acquire property and set fees for the use of park facilities. Commissioners serve four-year terms. As specified by state law, the Commission has a representative from each of Oregon's congressional districts, plus representatives of the areas east of the Cascade Mountains and west of the summit of the Coast Range.

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## Foreword

This book tells the story of Oregon’s State Parks from the vantage point of 2021, chronicling the challenges that have faced the Parks system over the past 100 years and celebrating the individuals – leaders, staff, volunteers, and members of the public – who have stepped up along the way to support, protect and defend what is now the nation’s premier State Parks system. The narrative also acknowledges where Oregon State Parks have fallen short, where we have perpetuated inequity and injustice by excluding – or simply not fully welcoming – staff and visitors on the basis of race, gender, ability, and other “differences.”

As you will read in the final chapter, “the purpose in studying history is not to judge our predecessors, but to critique ourselves and our own leap from aspiration to service” (p. 177). As this book goes to print, the Oregon State Parks system continues to face significant challenges. Climate change is no longer a future threat, it has arrived: megafires and sea level rise threaten some of our most treasured landscapes. Demands on our Parks continue to grow, outpacing the resources available to maintain and sustain them. We still have a long way to go to make certain our Parks evolve and adapt to these challenges, while making sure we are truly welcoming to all visitors.

What this book makes clear, however, is that facing challenges with courage and an innovative spirit is a through-line in the history of Oregon’s State Parks. The successes of the past century can be credited to people coming together to solve problems, bound by a shared love for our Parks and a commitment to their enduring legacy. We invite you to work with us to create a more socially equitable, ecologically resilient, and economically vibrant State Parks system, so that the future will have a place.

**Oregon State Parks and Recreation Commission**  
July, 2021



Tub Springs 1927

# Introduction

## *So the Future Will Have a Place*

In 1933, Sam Boardman, the first Superintendent of Oregon State Parks, wrote an S.O.S. There was a scenic area along the Oregon Coast that was about to be sold, and Boardman's hands were tied. It was the middle of the Great Depression, and Boardman couldn't afford to buy the land on behalf of the state. Only four years into his tenure, he was frustrated by what felt like an endless uphill battle to secure the natural beauties of Oregon. If people did not act quickly, he feared, all of the state's greatest treasures would be gobbled up by development, and nothing would remain to be preserved and protected. He had to move forward with his feet on the ground and his eyes on eternity:

*From the day I took up this work I have walked in the dust, but never have I let my vision be obscure of the future. The scar of the event of any one day must not be carried to a tomorrow. The future is the hope of mankind. Can't we lay the keel so the future will have a place?*

This kind of S.O.S would be called by every park administrator that would follow. Calls for more money, more land, more protections, and more help were sometimes answered, but were largely ignored by the general public until a point of crisis. Boardman cast himself as the lone crusader for Oregon Parks, but he was one of a chorus of men and women who rallied for the cause of scenic spaces for more than 100 years. Boardman's simple call to "lay the keel" was in response to the roiling waters of political machinations, funding shortages, cultural shifts, and national tragedies. The fortunes of the Oregon State Parks system ebbed and flowed with times, but there was always some storm on the horizon. Parks staff, leaders, and supporters fought to keep the system shipshape with every gale. But while Oregon's state park system has sometimes foundered, somehow, despite disaster, parks people have kept it from sinking.

This is a history of what became the *Oregon State Parks and Recreation Department*. Our focus is on how the system was conceived, grown, threatened, shaped, and reshaped as times and expectations changed. Our story takes us to moments of plucky idealism and catastrophic shortsightedness, from the department's shaky start as an adjunct of state highway system to its development as a full-fledged agency charged with over 113,000 acres of public lands and counting, along with a broad portfolio of tasks, divisions, and duties variously connected to an evolving mission. This story is also a story of shifts in mindset over nature and government, over travel and tourism, over preservation and use,



over who parks are for and how they should be. Parks were shaped by the people, and the people were shaped, willingly or unwillingly, by the times. Whatever the era, the parks relied, at the end of the day, on the people working daily “in the dust.”

Our story begins with a view of the ocean, automobile travel, Good Roads, and tourism. It follows economic booms and busts, changing needs and demographics, and the whims of politicians, volunteers, and bureaucrats. As parks grew, conceptions of nature, preservation, history, and recreation shifted. Protections were put in place, money was given and taken away, and the role of parks in the statewide governmental system was challenged and debated at the highest levels and, eventually, the ballot. The one constant has been the need to adapt, sometimes reluctantly, to these shifting sands. Adaptation and struggle are central themes of the book. There was always a crisis brewing for Oregon state parks. That the system exists at all—much less that it has gained the successes it has—is a testament to hard work of those who loved parks enough to fight against the tides.

That hard work includes the labors of those who have shaped the history of Oregon State Parks before us. Elisabeth Walton Potter, the first professional Park Historian, collected the materials that form the backbone of the Oregon State Parks and Recreation archive. The thousands and thousands of pages of material in this archive date back to earliest moments of park creation and cover more than could ever be captured in a single text. The digital extensions of the archive added by Katherine Schutt after Walton stepped down were vital to the last few chapters of this book. Sam Boardman, W. A. Langille, Chet Armstrong, Thomas R. Cox, Lawrence Merriam, Dave Talbot, and others all dedicated time and resources to writing on the history of Oregon state parks. Many more sat down with Potter, Merriam, or Schutt to tell their stories. This book could not exist without them.

But every book, and every collection, has limitations. The loudest voices in the archive are from the top. We have many sources from Sam Boardman and Dave Talbot, quite possibly the two loudest men in the history of the park system. But we have much less from the park advocates, opponents, and folks on the ground whose remembrances were not preserved in this same way. Our archival record, and thus our book, is quiet—at times silent—on the lives, feelings, and struggles of the everyday park workers who were instrumental in the foundation and upkeep of parks. We bring out those aspects where we can, but the story of life on the ground in Oregon state parks we leave for future historians.

We have also deliberately written a history of the Oregon state park *system* rather than of individual parks. It would take thousands of pages to do justice to the hundreds of parks and recreation areas we might have talked about—even if we focused just on the 256 in the current system and not the parks that were once were dreamed of or have yet to be. We mention specific parks when the

story leads us to them, but frequent or absent mentions of a particular park does not mean that we were gauging importance or picking favorites. Dave Talbot, the longest-serving Superintendent in the first hundred years of Oregon parks, was once asked if there was a park that was his personal favorite. His response?

“No. It is like picking out which of your kids you like best. It is just not possible. They all have their own individual personalities.... All of Oregon is a park.”

When we were commissioned to write this book, we were given a significant amount of free rein in what we should cover and how we should cover it. We were told to keep it grounded and keep it interesting—which have tried, at least, to do. And we were instructed to tell the story “warts and all,” which has helped us with those goals. Early on, as we looked through the records, we noticed the theme of persevering through crisis. Some crises parks faced with the rest of the state or the nation; others were unique to the parks system. There was no Golden Age for Oregon state parks. The challenges have changed and shifted over the decades, but they have never disappeared.

Most of this book was written in 2020. Oregon State Parks and Recreation was, like so many other institutions, buffeted by the blows of disaster throughout the months we were writing. Planned interviews and events evaporated. Many of the people who originally met with us to bring this book into being had to leave the department. The future remains uncertain in so many ways, big and small.

At previous turning points in the history of the Oregon parks system, staff and legislatures looked to the public for guidance. Parks were designed to be for the people, and parks will only survive if the people fight for them. Rather than adjuncts of a distant bureaucratic machine, parks are parts of communities. The greatest failures of the Oregon state park system have come from times in which the parks system falls out of step with the people it is designed to serve. The greatest successes have come from building a shared vision, for the present *and* the future, with an invested public.

Parks have often been framed as a legacy, something that lives on after we die. Sam Boardman once wrote, “We can take nothing. We can leave much.” And generations of hard work by parks people has left us much. But the work is never done. The fight to give the future a place, a park, a legacy—that fight continues, for everyone who works at Oregon State Parks, and everyone who cares about them.